

# SOUTH ASIA AT A CROSSROADS

**MEDIA, POWER, AND AUTHORITARIANISM**

WEDNESDAY 28 MAY, 2025









## **SCHEDULE**

1:30 PM - 2:00 PM

**REGISTRATION AND TEA/COFFEE**

2:00 PM - 2:15 PM

**WELCOME ADDRESS**

2:15 PM - 3:30 PM

**PANEL I**

**Newsrooms or War Rooms: Where is responsible journalism in South Asia?**

3:30 PM - 4:45 PM

**PANEL II**

**Democracy Under Watch: Surveillance in South Asia**

4:45 PM - 5:00 PM

**BREAK**

5:00 PM - 6:15 PM

**PANEL III**

**Youth's role in regime change: Lessons from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka**

6:15 PM - 6:30 PM

**CLOSING REMARKS**

6:30 PM - 7:00 PM

**EVENING DRINKS**







## **THE CHEVENING SOUTH ASIA JOURNALISM PROGRAMME 2025**

The Chevening South Asia Journalism Programme (SAJP) is a seven-week programme run within the University of Westminster's School of Media and Communication, with its internationally-renowned research profile and long history of practical engagement in public life.

The co-directors of the SAJP course are Professor Jean Seaton and Eleanor Weber-Ballard, who run the programme with Research Associate, Vijayta Lalwani. The 20 SAJP Fellows were selected through a competitive process from among hundreds of highly-qualified applicants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. All are successful mid-career professionals in print, digital and broadcast journalism, representing some of the largest media organisations in the region.

This year's programme focused on the theme **“Autocracy and the Rise of Strongmen.”** It explored pressing concerns around the rise of autocracies around the world, the emergence of dominant male leaders, and the resulting threats to democratic institutions. Particular focus was given to the implications for journalists both within the region, and internationally, alongside the growing challenges posed by misinformation and disinformation. These critical themes were explored in talks and discussions with journalists and experts; visits to the newsrooms of leading media organisations in the UK; field trips to museums and galleries; as well as workshops, conversations and presentations by the Fellows. The Fellows also worked on an essay on a theme of their choice, mentored by individual tutors.

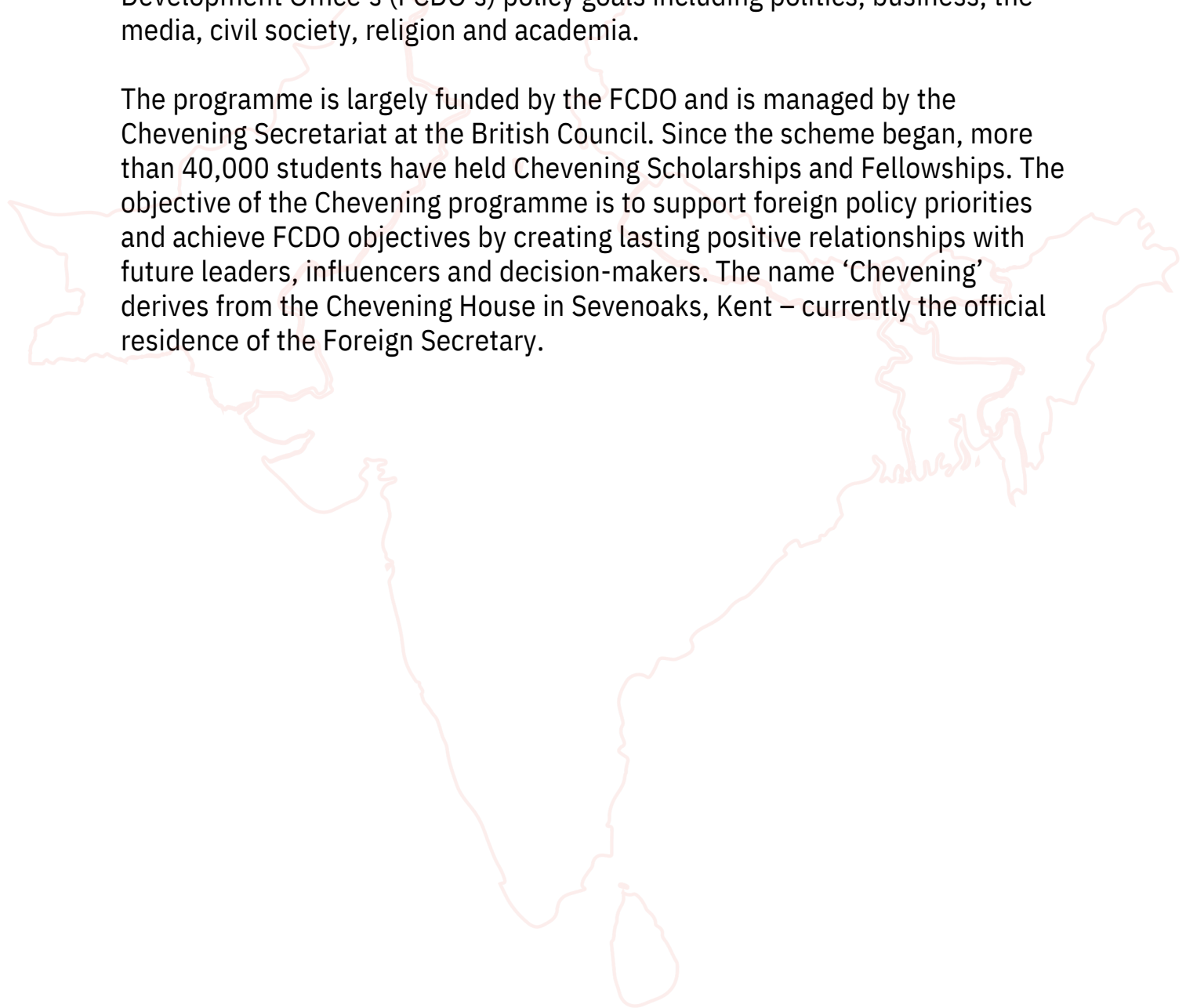
It is the learnings of the past seven weeks that have culminated in this symposium. Above all, by bringing together journalists who often work in isolation despite covering shared issues, the programme served as an important platform for fostering cross-border conversations.



## **THE CHEVENING SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMME: AN OVERVIEW**

The Chevening Scholarship programme began in 1983 and has developed into a prestigious international programme of Scholarships and Fellowships. The programme provides scholarships at higher education institutions in the United Kingdom for talented postgraduate students or researchers from over 130 countries. It also provides Fellowship places for mid-career professionals who are already working in fields related to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO's) policy goals including politics, business, the media, civil society, religion and academia.

The programme is largely funded by the FCDO and is managed by the Chevening Secretariat at the British Council. Since the scheme began, more than 40,000 students have held Chevening Scholarships and Fellowships. The objective of the Chevening programme is to support foreign policy priorities and achieve FCDO objectives by creating lasting positive relationships with future leaders, influencers and decision-makers. The name 'Chevening' derives from the Chevening House in Sevenoaks, Kent – currently the official residence of the Foreign Secretary.





## **NOTE FROM THE SAJP 2025 PROGRAMME DIRECTORS**

Journalism ought to be the attempt to find out what has happened – and the dogged intention to find out what other people haven't noticed or don't want known. At its best it anchors societies, economies and politics in reality. But across the world journalism and journalists are under attack and must navigate appalling new pressures. So it is an honour to have 20 distinguished journalists from all over South Asia here for this unique programme.

There has been an added element this year that journalists from India and Pakistan have been here together in the same room while their countries were fighting. But they are reporters, whose job it is to observe and try their best to find out what has happened, and along with their colleagues from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, they have navigated the crisis as reporters. The Fellows have been careful, gone on listening to each other, and made the best use of an extraordinary opportunity to see each other's reporting and come to an understanding of how other people see things.

UK institutions have been generous and attentive to the Fellows. When we went into the BBC this year we saw Samir Shah, the BBC Chair, and amongst other visits, we went to the Economist; the Moghul exhibition at the V&A; radical galleries in the East End of London; to Cardiff to see devolved government and local reporting; to Oxford, to discuss ground breaking journalism research on women experts; and to Peace Direct. We also heard from outlets such as The Bristol Cable; fellows attended debates at entities ranging from The Frontline Club (where they were visiting members) to Policy Exchange; and we went to various other theatres, museums, and media houses. Additional discussions with journalists, curators, and even Lords have also been tremendously fun and fascinating. We can only thank our Fellows for their work, their journalism, and their open-minded enthusiasm for the project we have built together.

- Professor Jean Seaton  
Eleanor Weber-Ballard  
Vijayta Lalwani

## **THE CHEVENING SYMPOSIUM 2025**

### **South Asia at a Crossroads: Media, Power, and Authoritarianism**

Border escalations teetering on the brink of war. Youth-led uprisings challenging entrenched regimes. Violent crackdowns in response. South Asia is in the throes of intense upheaval as old conflicts resurface and new crises emerge.

In this volatile landscape, several critical questions arise. As some sections of the media grow more subservient to power, what is the role of responsible journalism in the region? How are governments leveraging technology to surveil and silence dissent? And what price do young people pay for challenging repression?

These issues take centre stage at this symposium titled “**South Asia at a Crossroads: Power, Media, and Authoritarianism**” organised by us — the 20 journalists of the South Asia Journalism Programme 2025 cohort.

Over the past seven weeks, we have collaborated closely to shape this event: defining its central themes, selecting speakers, identifying our audience, and designing the day's format. Members of our cohort are not only moderating the panels but also participating as speakers — bringing forward our personal experiences, professional insights, and the rich discussions we have had through the programme.

Spread across three panels, our symposium will examine how press freedom is shrinking, surveillance is growing, and young people are rising up against injustice, often in the face of violent and authoritarian reprisals in the region. We hope you find meaning and value in the conversations that unfold.

- Chevening SAJP 2025 Fellows



## **PANEL OVERVIEWS**

### **PANEL I: Newsrooms or War Rooms: Where is responsible journalism in South Asia?**

In South Asia, journalism faces enormous challenges. The transformation of some newsrooms into hyper-nationalist echo chambers is especially stark during times of conflict. Television anchors mimic combat roles, ride simulated helicopters, and wage rhetorical wars that serve more to inflame than to inform. Rather than asking tough questions to those in power, many mainstream media outlets now mirror the views of military establishments and ruling governments, pushing predetermined narratives at the expense of truth.

This erosion of editorial independence impacts public trust, threatens inter-country relations, and deepens polarisation. As mainstream media falls short, some turn to alternative platforms for news – including social media – for much needed nuance, or even comic relief. In many cases, memes now offer more clarity than primetime debates. Yet even these spaces are shrinking under political pressure.

Why does journalism fall into the trap of jingoism? What structural factors are fuelling this shift? Are there still voices pushing back, holding power to account?

This panel will explore how the media in South Asia has fuelled polarisation, and its broader impact on democracy and regional peace.

#### **CHAIR: Andrew Whitehead**

Andrew Whitehead is a historian, lecturer, author and freelance journalist. He worked for *BBC News* for 35 years including as *BBC India* correspondent, and as a presenter with and then Editor of *BBC World Service News*. He is an honorary professor at the University of Nottingham and also a visiting professor at the Asian College of Journalism in Chennai, India. His books include *A Mission in Kashmir*, and *The Lives of Freda: The Political, Spiritual and Personal Journeys of Freda Bedi*. He is now working on an oral history of the British New Left.

## **SPEAKERS:**

### **Dr Ayesha Siddiq**

Dr Ayesha Siddiq is a Pakistani political scientist with a PhD in War Studies from King's College London, specialising in military affairs, national security, and defense economics. Author of *Military Inc.*, she has more than 17 years of experience, writes internationally, consults globally, and has taught at top academic institutions.

### **Meenakshi Ravi**

Meenakshi Ravi is a journalist and media analyst based in London. An Executive Producer with *Al Jazeera English*, Meenakshi works on the *The Listening Post*, a weekly show by the channel that examines and scrutinises the global media. Prior to joining *Al Jazeera English*, Meenakshi worked with *CNBC* in Mumbai, India.

### **David Loyn**

David Loyn is an author, journalist, and analyst specialising in Afghanistan, South Asia, and imperial history. He currently serves on an advisory panel to the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) on South Asia policy. He was a *BBC* correspondent for over three decades, reporting from global conflict zones. His most recent posting was in Afghanistan—a country he has covered since 1994. He also worked as *BBC's* South Asia Correspondent based in Delhi.

## **PANEL II: Democracy Under Watch: Surveillance in South Asia**

As governments across South Asia deploy powerful digital tools to monitor and control their citizens, a new form of tyranny is emerging—tech-enabled, opaque, and often unaccountable. Whether through spyware, AI-driven facial recognition, or data collection regimes, surveillance is being weaponised to crush dissent and concentrate power.

How has state surveillance expanded and what legal frameworks enable or challenge it? What does the expansion of surveillance mean for marginalised communities and democratic participation? Can constitutional safeguards and privacy laws keep pace with technological abuses? Can the region build a digital rights movement strong enough to challenge these new regimes of control?

This panel will explore how the centralisation of power, the decline of democratic norms, and the manipulation of digital spaces are transforming governance in South Asia.

### **CHAIR: Adrija Bose**

Adrija Bose, Senior Editor at BOOM, leads Decode, an investigative vertical on technology, society, and politics. With 13 years of experience, Adrija — a current Fellow of the Chevening SAJP cohort — has reported on disinformation, digital rights, and online extremism. Her work has won three UN Laadli Media Awards, the RedInk Award for illegal coal mining exposés, and the Polestar Award. She previously worked at *News18*, *HuffPost India*, *NDTV*, and *Firstpost*.

### **SPEAKERS:**

#### **Dr Chintan Chandrachud**

Dr Chintan Chandrachud is a London-based barrister with a formidable reputation in commercial litigation, international arbitration and public law. With expertise in a broad spectrum of arbitral fora and commercial court work, Chintan combines rigorous scholarship with courtroom craft. He is the author of two books, *Balanced Constitutionalism* and *The Cases That India Forgot*. In 2023, he was honoured with the India-UK Achievers Award, recognising his excellence across law and public service.



## **Aman Sethi**

Aman Sethi is the editor-in-chief of openDemocracy. An award-winning journalist whose work critically examines the intersections of technology, surveillance, and state power, he has held senior editorial positions at *HuffPost*, *BuzzFeed*, and *Coda Media*, and served as a correspondent for *The Hindu* in both India and Africa. He hosts the podcast *In Solidarity*, where he explores topics such as the border industrial complex, the role of artificial intelligence in migration control, and the commodification of surveillance technologies. He is the author of non-fiction book *A Free Man*.

## **Ziaullah Hamdard**

Ziaullah Hamdard is a journalist and academic from Pakistan, currently based in the United Kingdom. He has contributed to prominent media and advocacy platforms, including Pakistan Television, Radio Pakistan, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, and UKS Research Centre in Islamabad. A lecturer in Journalism and Mass Communication at Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan, he is currently pursuing a PhD in Communication, Media, and Cultural Studies at Solent University, UK.

## **Dr Yung Au**

Dr Yung Au is a Visiting OTF Senior ICFP Fellow at the School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford. Her work explores the surveillance industrial complex, critical mapping, and data infrastructures, with a focus on their colonial, geopolitical, and legislative entanglements. She previously led *Stories in/around the Machine*, a project on algorithmic systems and informal life in Asian cities. A Board Member of the Surveillance in the Majority World Network, she has also taught at Oxford and the University of the Arts London.

### **PANEL III: Youth's role in regime change: Lessons from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka**

When recent youth uprisings in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka took a violent turn, authoritarian regimes in the two countries responded with heavy-handedness: they unleashed brute police force on young protestors, ordered mass arrest of leaders, and brought in even stricter media censorship methods.

Yet, it was the youth who stood at the forefront, playing a decisive role in toppling governments and reshaping the political landscape of the region.

As sections of the legacy media became another tool of propaganda, how did alternate media platforms go around the restrictions? What innovative methods and technologies did the protestors use? And what was the role of young women in the protests?

This panel will look at some of the lessons Bangladesh and Sri Lanka may have for other democracies struggling for survival, and what such movements teach us about change of power.

#### **CHAIR: Professor Naomi Hossain**

Naomi Hossain is a Global Research Professor at SOAS, University of London. Her work centres on two distinct but occasionally converging areas: the politics of Bangladesh's development, and the contentious politics of public services and disasters (beyond Bangladesh). In both themes, she focuses on issues of state accountability and responsiveness, protest and civic agency, and the role of aid.

#### **SPEAKERS:**

##### **TU Senan**

TU Senan is the International Coordinator of Tamil Solidarity in Britain. He is a long-time campaigner for Tamil rights in Sri Lanka and has worked extensively among the Tamil diaspora and in Europe. Senan has also travelled to Sri Lanka and India to build international solidarity and advocate for justice for Sri Lankan Tamils.

## **Ikhtisad Ahmed**

Ikhtisad Ahmed is the Managing Editor of *Netra News*, Bangladesh's first independent media outlet. Under his leadership, *Netra News* has won multiple international awards, including the 2025 Shorenstein Journalism Award and the 2024 Human Rights Press Award, for fearless investigative journalism and reporting on human rights violations in Bangladesh.

## **Kamal Ahmed**

Kamal Ahmed is the Head of the Media Reform Commission and a senior journalist with decades of experience in Bangladeshi and international media. Formerly with *BBC Bangla* and *Prothom Alo*, he contributes to leading publications and advises human rights organisations. Kamal holds degrees in law and history from Dhaka and Rajshahi universities.

## **Rashad Ahamad**

Rashad Ahamad is an investigative journalist and Staff Correspondent at *New Age*, Dhaka, and a current Fellow of the Chevening SAJP cohort. With over 15 years of experience, he reports on labour rights, climate change, disasters, and public health. His award-winning work includes coverage of the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh, the July movement, and Covid-19, earning fellowships and national journalism honours for impactful reporting.



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**FELLOWS 2025**





**Mahjabeen Abid**  
Multimedia Journalist  
Pakistan  
mahjabeenkhakhi23@gmail.com  
Instagram: mahjabeenabidkhakhi\_



**Sandranathan Rubatheesan**  
Journalist, The Sunday Times  
Sri Lanka  
srtheesa@hotmail.com  
X: rubatheesan



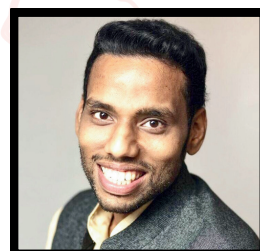
**Zia Chowdhury**  
Staff Correspondent  
The Business Standard  
Bangladesh  
zianews24@gmail.com  
X: Zia\_Reporter



**Smitha TK**  
Independent Journalist  
India  
Smitha.tarur@gmail.com  
X: smitha\_tk



**Anwar Zeb**  
Reporter, Hum News  
Pakistan  
anwarjournalist1@gmail.com  
X: IMAnwarZeb



**Chaitanya Marpakwar**  
Assistant Editor, Times of India  
Mumbai, India  
marpakwarchaitanya@gmail.com  
X: chaitanya\_pm



**Rashad Ahamad**  
Staff Correspondent, New Age  
Bangladesh  
rabds123@gmail.com  
X: RashadAhamad\_BD



**Kaushik Deka**  
Executive Editor, India Today  
Magazine, and Editor,  
India Today NE, India  
kaushik.deka@gmail.com  
X: KDscribe



**Utkarsh Anand**  
National Legal Editor, Hindustan  
Times, India  
utkarshanand@yahoo.com  
X: utkarsh\_aanand



**Akbar Notezai**  
Dawn staffer  
Pakistan  
akbar.notezai@gmail.com  
X: Akbar\_notezai





**Zeenat Bibi**

Independent Journalist, Khyber  
Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan  
rjzainykhana@yahoo.com  
X: Zeenatwrites



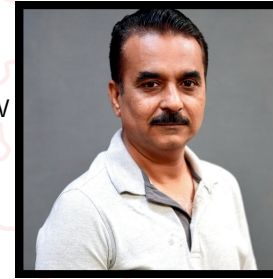
**Mirwaise Achakzai**

Senior Producer, ARY News  
Pakistan  
mirwaise1989@gmail.com  
X: mirwaisej



**Nayyer Ali**

Special Correspondent, Samaa TV  
Secretary National Press Club  
Pakistan  
nayyer.news@gmail.com  
X: Nayyer\_Aliz



**Riaz Ahmed Janjhi**

Correspondent, BBC Urdu  
Pakistan  
riaz.bbc73@gmail.com  
X: RiazSangi



**Asim Ahmed Khan**

Multimedia Journalist, CNN  
Pakistan  
leokhanasim93@gmail.com  
X: leokhanasim



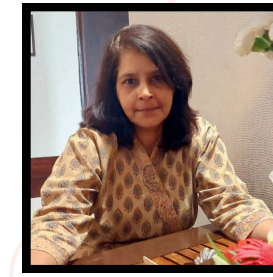
**Romita Saluja**

Independent Journalist  
India  
romitasaluja@gmail.com  
X: RomitaSaluja



**Md. Kamruzzaman**

Independent Journalist  
TRT World, Bangladesh  
mkzbablu@gmail.com  
Facebook: Kamruzzaman Bablu



**Rupashree Nanda**

Independent Journalist,  
Documentary Filmmaker, India  
rupashree.nanda@gmail.com  
X: rupashreenanda



**Adrija Bose**

Senior Editor, BOOM  
India  
adrijabose2010@gmail.com  
X: adrijabose



**Tora Agarwala**

Independent Journalist  
India  
tora.agarwala@gmail.com  
X: ToraAgarwala



## **NOTES**



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